

## Episode 10 (Season 2, Episode 2) On Disability

1 Linda Steer: Have you ever looked at Velázquez's *Las Meninas*? It's an intriguing court painting that has elicited a lot of art historical research over the years. It's one of those paintings that's a bit mysterious because it's so different from typical portraits of the era. This is Spain in 1656, and the artist has incorporated himself into the painting, so it is a painting of the artist painting the royal couple. Velázquez is at the left of the canvas and King Philip IV and Mariana of Austria are reflected in a mirror. At the centre of the painting, we see the Infanta Margarita and her maids. There are other figures in the painting, but I want to draw your attention to the two figures on the right: the so-called "court dwarfs" who have been identified as Mari Bárbola and Nicolasito Pertusato.

[Theme song + intro]

2 LS: I'm Linda Steer and I'm here with co-host Madeline Collins. We've been talking about representations of disability in art. Madeline, have any of your art history courses covered disability as a topic?

3 Madeline Collins: It's actually very rare for the topic to crop up in class, and you don't even notice that until someone mentions the absence. It might be mentioned in brief, but it's never the focus.

4 LS: That is not surprising. I'm realizing that I rarely talk about the history of differently-abled bodies in Western art in my classes even though I've experienced disability myself. Yet there is a growing body of research that connects the field of disability studies to the field of art history. For instance, there are two relatively new academic anthologies that combine disability studies scholarship with scholarship on contemporary art and art history. There's even a gallery in Toronto that is dedicated to showing the work of artists with disabilities. Tangled Art + Disability provides resources and advocacy for people with disabilities in all areas of the arts. And, they take an intersectional approach, which is cool. In this episode we will think about why disability might be absent from the history of Western art and how we might rectify that.

5 MC: We'll also talk about what we've been missing, and how some contemporary artists are representing disability in powerful ways.

[music: *Ortiz - Recercada primera sobre los tenores italianos*]

6 MC: But first, let's return to Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. Working as the court painter for King Philip IV, Velázquez was a successful painter in the 17th century, also known as "the Golden Age of Spanish painting." He painted many portraits of royalty and those who lived and worked at the court, including some of the more than 100 people with restricted growth. Why were there so many little people in Phillip's court? One scholar notes that while "their main function

was to be decorative: their main task was to amuse,” they also performed other duties in court, such as administrative duties, childcare and chaperoning. However, the Prado museum notes that visible difference attracted the curiosity of the king. So the roles of people with visible disabilities in early modern courts were complex. In *Las Meninas*, Velázquez paints Mari Bárbola with as much dignity as the other women in the painting, who all stand in their finery and look out of the canvas at us. Scholars have noted, however, that artists portraying court figures in Velázquez’s time purposely juxtaposed individuals to demonstrate physical and social difference. While it may not seem obvious to us now, we are looking at a depiction of hierarchy that not only shows the superiority of the royal family by birthright, but also celebrates their able bodies.

7 LS: Velázquez’s painting is indeed fascinating, as are other historical paintings of differently-abled people. To understand some of these works, it’s useful to think about the work of contemporary artist, writer, and curator Riva Lehrer. Lehrer has written about some of the issues with portrayals of visibly disabled people in historical work and explains how she approaches her own practice. Reacting to her college education where people with disabilities were absent in the paintings she studied in art history and a to painting instructor who suggested that she should focus on “universal” bodies (rather than disabled bodies) in her work, Lehrer writes: “Deep in the history of portraiture lies a paradox. Disability forms the *raison d’être* of portraiture, yet it is nearly impossible to create a portrait of a disabled subject. The history of portraiture forms the basis of Western concepts of power, beauty, affluence, dignity, and sexuality: all concepts that rest on ideal bodies and reject impairment. Disability shows up as a negative space, a silhouette cut from thin black paper.”

[music: *Schumann - Scenes from Childhood* ]

8 LS: For Lehrer, images of disabled bodies in Western art and visual culture can be divided into two categories: humanizing works and medicalized depictions. Medicalized depictions tend to represent disabled bodies in pathologizing and dehumanizing ways for the purposes of diagnosis or spectacle. For example, she notes that in *Painting of a Man With a Disability* from the mid 16th century, the painted figure of a prone, naked man is presented under a sheet of paper that you have to lift to see the image. Originally in a private collection, the painting now resides in Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches [kunst-histore-i-chis] Museum. Ableism is implicit in many of the examples Lehrer discusses, even those that she describes as positive, such as Antonis Mor’s *Pejerón, The Jester of the Count of Benavente and the Grand Duke of Alba*, (1559–61), which “possesses a dignified gravity uncommon in depictions of impairment.” Why is ableism implicit? Because depictions of disabled bodies are made in reference to the ideal able body. While the proportions of the ideal body change over time, ideal bodies are linked to concepts of perfection, wholeness, and godliness.

9a MC: These concepts of perfection or wholeness are so pervasive that even though we see them all the time in visual culture, we rarely question them. This corresponds with the “ideology of ability,” a term used by disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers. For Siebers, ability and able-bodiedness are the norms against which disabled bodies are judged.abled bodies are seen as having value while those with less ability become less than human. This internalized cultural notion contributes to the practice of eugenics and other ableist beliefs. In contrast, we see the work of Lehrer reflecting the social model of disability, which understands that humans themselves are not disabled, but are rather disabled by the inaccessibility and perceptions of the society around us.

9b MC: Much of Lehrer’s work centres on collaboration with other artists with disabilities. For instance she interviewed her subjects about their lives and their thoughts on disability for her first series of paintings, entitled *Circle Stories*. Lehrer was mindful of not reproducing the medicalized, dehumanizing gaze, which she calls “toxic staring”, that has affected people with disabilities their whole lives.

9c MC: We’ve talked about the power of the gaze in previous episodes of this podcast – who’s looking at whom? Who has the power in that dynamic? Who is allowed to look and who isn’t? Lehrer aims to counter these established principles of looking, and the result is a series of portraits that focus on beauty rather than pain. She writes: “I wanted to make a space without pain. To show disabled people as powerful, gorgeous, sexual, even majestic.”

10 LS: Yes! And Lehrer writes that the *Circle Stories* portraits “verge on hagiography.” In a way, these portraits counter stigma. Lehrer also notes that even those who look “normal” don’t think of themselves as “normal.” I thought this point was interesting. It reminds me how harmful notions of the ideal body can be. As I said earlier, the specific proportions of the ideal body change through the history of art, but there is *always* an ideal body. And very very few of us have that body.

[music- *Jezeq - Bugatti Step*]

11 LS: We’ve focused a lot on depictions of bodies, which makes sense because a lot of historical art focuses on the body. But what about other kinds of experiences that might be framed as disability? And how does disability intersect with other forms of socially and culturally constructed difference? Madeline is going to introduce us to the work of Persimmon Blackbridge an artist she discovered in her research for this episode. A Canadian sculptor, writer, curator and performer, Blackbridge’s work touches on disability, institutionalization, censorship, queer identity, and generational alcoholism.

12a MC: I was really interested in Blackbridge’s work because she offers a contemporary view of the disabled body, particularly the disabled female body, in

a way that challenges what we think defines us and what doesn't. . Blackbridge identifies as a lesbian as well as disabled, and these two identities inform her work — in an interview with E-Magazine she talks about how having a learning disability and a psychiatric history was something she hid for a long time out of fear of the way she would be perceived.

12b MC: In 1984 Blackbridge worked with Sheila Gilhooly, a woman who had been incarcerated in the 60s for being a lesbian *Still Sane*, their collaborative exhibition and book provided both sculptural and written accounts of Gilhooly's experience while in the hospital. Blackbridge created 27 life-size clay body casts and Gilhooly wrote on them. She described her experiences of coming out, being institutionalized by her therapist for hysteria, and her torturous, disturbing experiences inside the hospital. The exhibition amplified the disabled and queer experience in a world that doesn't recognize either as "normal" or human, and showed strength in the face of that.

12c MC: Blackbridge worked in sculpture again for her 2018 her exhibition "Constructed Identities" at the Tangled Arts Gallery, the gallery that Linda mentioned at the beginning of this episode. The exhibition consists of several hand-carved sculptures of human bodies mounted onto the walls. The bodies are fragmented. For some, the limbs have been replaced with wings, while others are split straight down the middle, or have been created from a mismatched array of puppet parts, mechanical elements, pieces of Barbie dolls, or animal bones. For Blackbridge the sculptures are layered with meaning whether it is the experience of disability, grief or hardship, sexuality. These parts of us are inextricable from our identities — in fact, these are the things that shape us. An interviewer writes that Blackbridge "finds meaning in making art that lessens the sense of isolation and shame, just by talking about her disability in public." Rather than highlighting disability as a glaring symbol of a person's difference, as systemic ableism tries to tell us, Blackbridge reminds us that it has always been a part of who we are, as normal and as integral as any other part of us. Through all these works, Blackbridge makes the invisible visible, creating a visual representation of our very complex identities.

13a LS: I like Blackbridge's approach to the experience of disability and to representing that experience in art. It's interesting that, like Lehrer, she takes a collaborative approach to some of her work. Collaboration can certainly build community, which is great, but it is also political, I think, in the sense that it challenges the norms of the institutions of art. How? Well, there's this idea of genius and individuality and vision that runs through the history of art. So for instance, by working collaboratively and not signing their work, early 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde art movements, such as surrealism and dada, challenged this idea that modern art is to be understood only as the expression of a creative personality.

13b LS: I want to think about this cultural construction of the genius artist for a moment because there are connections to ideas about artists with disabilities. Quite a long time ago art historian Griselda Pollock wrote about the artist-genius myth in relation to Vincent van Gogh. Everyone's favourite! She stated that van Gogh is the modern archetype of the so-called tortured genius – and that people seek to understand his painting by trying to understand his illness. And I think she is right: most popular cultural references to van Gogh's work focus on his ear and his suicide. There is a kind of slippage where we tend to equate the artist's life with his work and there is an assumption that illness or suffering is what makes his work so great.

13c LS: I think something similar happens with Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. There is so much focus on the accident she lived through and the pain she endured. Certainly some of her work was biographical, and as a person who has lived through multiple back surgeries and chronic pain, her painting *The Broken Column*, for instance, really speaks to me. But, as with van Gogh, there is an entire industry around romanticising the artist's pain. And that's a problem.

13d LS: These ideas about pain and creativity are patronizing to artists like van Gogh and Kahlo who were so much more than their biographies. Both were hard working, creative, intellectual artists whose work is not a simple expression of their difficult experiences. A new book by Emily Rapp Black called *Frida Kahlo and My Left Leg* promises to explore some of these ideas.

14 MC: We just have a couple of minutes left in this episode, but I wanted to mention accessibility in curatorial practice. Eliza Chandler is the artistic director at Tangled Arts Gallery, and she's talked about the increasing interest in accessibility in museums, although there's still a long way to go. She offers a multitude of ways curators can actively integrate accessibility into curatorial practice, such as hanging works lower, with audio descriptions and braille labels accompanying every piece, or creating secondary sculptures that can be touched by viewers who cannot see them, and special viewings for those who can't necessarily sit still, like people with autism or Tourettes. It's also important to consider accessibility for artists with disabilities, since disabled creators face a completely different set of social, financial and creative obstacles in the art world. As Chandler notes, we need to begin adjusting our culture to people's needs, rather than forcing them to fit into what already exists.

15 LS: Thanks Madeline! We've covered a lot in this episode. And listeners, I hope you'll take a look at our episode notes where you can find links to images of some of the works of art we've talked about along with some of the resources we consulted for this episode. There's a lot more we could say about this topic, but for now, that's a wrap! See you next time!

[credits w music]